

A
SERMON

Preached at

White-Hall,

February the 19th, 168².

Being the First FRIDAY in

LENT.

B Y

EDW. STILLINGFLEET, D.D.

Dean of St. Paul's,

And Chaplain in Ordinary to His MAJESTY.

L O N D O N,

Printed for *Henry Mortlock*, at the *Phoenix* in
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SERMON

White-Hall

February the 10th 1688.
Being the Fifth FRIDAY in

DECEMBER.

BY

EDWIN STILLINGFLEET, D.D.

Dean of St Paul's

Preached in Ordinary to His MAJESTY.

LONDON.

Printed for Henry Blandford, at the Bible in
St Paul's Church-yard, MDCCLXXXV.

St LUKE xv. 18.

*I will arise and go to my Father, and will say to him,
Father, I have sinned against heaven and before
thee.*

IN the foregoing Verse, we find the Prodigal Son so far awakened and *come to himself*, as to be sensible of the Miserable Condition he had brought himself into by his own folly and wickedness. But, before he came to this, there is a Remarkable Turn in the course of his Life, set down by our Saviour in the beginning of this Excellent Parable. For, He was first very Impatient of being under the Wife Conduct of his Father, and thought he could manage his own affairs far more to his Contentment and Satisfaction, if he were but permitted to use his Liberty, and were not so strictly tyed up to the Grave and Formal Methods of Living, observed and required in his Father's House. Which might pass for Wisdom in Age, and be agreeable enough to such whose Life and Vigour were decayed; and who were now to maintain their Authority over their Children by seeming to be so much wiser than they: But it is a rare thing

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thing for Youth and Age to agree in the opinion of Wisdom: For it is not the Care, the Experience, the Judgment of a wise and tender Father, that can allay the Heats, or calm the Passions, or over-rule the Violent Inclinations of Youth; but whatever it cost them afterwards, some will be still trying the Experiment, whether it doth not more conduce to the happiness of Life to pursue their own Fancies and Designs, than to hearken to another's Directions (though a Father's) whose Circumstances are so much different from their own. Thus our Blessed Saviour represents in the Parable this young Prodigal, as weary of being rich and easie at Home, and fond of seeing the Pleasures of the World; and therefore nothing would satisfie him unless he were Intrusted with the Stock which was Intended for him, that he might shew the difference between his Father's Conduct and his own.

And this very soon appeared; for this hopeful Manager had not been long abroad, but he wasted his substance with riotous living. And to make him the more sensible of his Folly, there happened a more than ordinary scarcity, which made his low and exhausted Condition more uneasy to him. But the Sense of Shame was yet greater with him than that of his Folly; and whatever shifts he underwent, he would by no means

means yet think of returning home; but rather chose to submit to the meanest and basest employment in hopes to avoid the Necessity of it. But at last, Reason and Consideration began to work upon him, which is called, *his coming to himself*: and then he takes up a Resolution to go home to his Father, and to throw himself at his Feet; to confess his fault ingenuously and freely, and to beg pardon for his former Folly, in hopes of Forgiveness and Reconciliation. *I will arise and go to my Father, and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.*

Under this Parable, our Saviour sets forth the state of a Sinner, (1.) In his wilfull degeneracy from God, his Father, both by Creation and Providence; his uneasiness under his just and holy Laws; his impatience of being restrained by them; his casting off the Bonds of Duty to him; and running into all kind of Disorders without regard to God, or his own Soul. (2.) In the dissatisfaction he found in his evil Courses; being very much disappointed in the great Expectations he had in the Pleasures of Sin; wasting his health, interest, reputation, estate, and above all, the Peace and Tranquillity of his Mind, which was more valuable than any other Delight whatsoever, and he now found impossible to be enjoy'd in a course of Rebellion against his heavenly Father. (3.) In the Conviction of his Folly.

Folly upon due Consideration of what he had done; which is *Emphatically* called *Coming to himself*; having before acted so much below himself, and against himself; unworthy of the Relation he stands in to God; of those Faculties he had bestow'd upon him; and of those hopes and expectations he might have had from him either as to this or another World. (4.) In the Resolution he takes upon this Conviction, no longer to delay his purpose of Repenting and Returning home, but to embrace the present opportunity of doing it freely, heartily and ingenuously, *I will arise and go to my Father, &c.*

Having formerly in this Place, and on a like Occasion considered the Prodigal Son's *coming to himself*, I shall now pursue the Method of his Repentance in the *Resolution* he here takes *to arise and go to his Father, &c.*

And therein I shall enquire into these things,

I. What Grounds a Sinner hath to encourage him to Repent; or to form such a Resolution in his Mind *that he will arise and go to his Father*, when he knows he hath so much provoked and offended him.

II. How necessary it is in order to true Repentance to form a fixed and steady Resolution to go through with it, *I will arise and go, &c.*

First, What Grounds a Sinner hath to encourage him to Repent; or to make Application to his Father

Father in order to Forgiveness, since he is convinced he hath so justly offended him. For, if we consider the Circumstances here mention'd, he had no such Reason to hope to be receiv'd into Favour upon such easie Terms, as are here expressed; For,

(1.) He had wilfully forsaken his Father's House, without any just Cause of Complaint of any hard usage there.

(2.) He had embraced such a Course of Life, which he knew was displeasing to him, living riotously and disorderly, in a way contrary to his Will.

(3.) He never thought of Returning home, till mere necessity forced him; till Hunger and Poverty made him *come to himself*.

And what could be more disobliging to a Father, than such Circumstances as these?

(1.) His Father never forced him from home, nor made his Condition uneasie there. Our Saviour here represents Almighty God, as dealing with Mankind like a tender and indulgent Father, and not like a severe and hard Master; his Laws being intended for our Good, and not for his own Advantage. There is no Duty of ours towards God, or our selves, or others, but is founded on this Relation to God as a Father to Mankind. Nothing can be more reasonable in general than that the Father should order and direct

direct his Children, and give such Rules which are fitting for them to observe; And if we examine the particular Laws of Nature, or the Dictates of Reason as to Good and Evil, we shall find them very agreeable to God's Paternal Government.

What is the Duty of Prayer to God, but asking daily Blessing of our heavenly Father? What is our Thanksgiving, but a solemn owning his Paternal Care and Bounty towards us? And in these two, the main Duties of Natural Religion consist. The Neglect whereof, is such a disrespect to our Heavenly Father, as is not consistent with our believing him to be so. For, *Malac. i. 6.* as God himself argues in the Prophet, *A Son honoureth his Father, and a Servant his Master: If then I be a Father, where is mine honour? And if I be a Master, where is my Fear?* God was a Father by the Right of Creation and Providence: but he was a Master to the *Jews* in respect of the Bondage of the Law; and as there was a Spirit of Bondage on that account in them, which inclined them to a more servile Fear; so there ought to have been a natural Spirit of Adoption toward God as their Supreme Creatour and Father; which should excite all men to such a dutifull Love, such a Reverential Esteem, such a mixture of Awe and Kindness as is in Children towards their Parents. Yea, it ought to be much greater

greater than that can be supposed; because the Distance is Infinite between God and us; and our Dependence more immediate and necessary; and there is in him a Concurrence of all Perfections, which may cause in us the highest Esteem, and the humblest Adoration. There is an unquestionable Duty owing by Children to their earthly Parents, *but how much rather* (saith the Apostle) *ought we to be in subjection to the Father of Spirits?* The Fathers of our Flesh may be very Kind, but not Wise in their Love; or Wise and not so Kind; or they may be both Wise and Kind, but not Able to help their Children. They may love and pity, and pray for them, when they are in Misery, or Sicknes and Pain; but after all, they are unable to relieve them; For the most indulgent Father, when his bowels yearn, and his heart is ready to break at the sight of a Child lying under the Agonies of Death, is not able to give a Moments Respite to the terrible Pangs, which he can neither behold nor abate. But our heavenly Father hath not onely Infinite Wisdom, but Infinite Kindness and Power; and where all these are joined together, what Honour, what Love, what Fear is due unto him! Although there be defects in their Parents, yet Children are still bound to obey them, and to shew a mighty regard and Reverence towards them; but here it is so much otherwise,

Heb. 12. 9.
Οὐ μάλ᾽ ἢ
μᾶλλον.

that if we could conceive our selves without this Relation to God, yet his Perfections are so many, so great, so infinite, as to deserve and require our utmost Veneration. The Prodigal Son could then have no Reason to complain of the Duty which he owed to his Father.

And was it not fit for him to appoint the Orders of his Family, and to expect that his Children should behave themselves therein, as became the Relation they stood in to himself and to one another? That they should have a decent regard to themselves in Sobriety, Temperance, Command of their Passions, and care of their Words; That they should behave themselves towards their Brethren with Sincerity, Kindness and Justice; which comprehend all the Duties we owe to one another?

And what now was there in all this, that the Prodigal could have any Cause to complain of, or that should make his Father's House so uneasy to him? But his Father had just Cause to be provoked, when his Wife Counsels, and Prudent Care, and Constant Kindness, and Righteous Government were so much slighted and despised by a disobedient and ungratefull Son; who had so little Sense of his Duty or his Interest as to be weary of being so well at home, and therefore impatiently desiring to find out new methods of Living well, as he then thought, when the best

Orders of his Father's Family were become so displeasing to him.

(2.) But what were these new and fine Contrivances for his own happiness? He began to suspect his Wife Father did not allow his Children Liberty enough at home, and that he concealed from him the great Mystery of the Happiness of Life, and therefore concluded, that if he did give way to those Desires which he found to be Natural, but his Father thought Unreasonable, he should enjoy much more Pleasure and Satisfaction than he did at home. And being resolved upon this, he gives way to those Inclinations he found strongest in himself; denies himself no Pleasures of Life, accounts Vertue but a Name which sower and morose Persons put upon their own humours; and Religion but a Device for Fools to deceive themselves, and Knaves to deceive others by. And so he throws off all checks and restraints upon himself; and never regards the Good or Evil of what he doeth, for his Lusts are his Laws, and the satisfaction of them he now looks upon as the onely real Happiness of Mankind.

And could any thing be supposed more provoking to his Heavenly Father than such a wicked and dissolute way of Living? So contrary to his Father's Will, to his own Reason, Con-

science, Interest, Reputation; and which soon brought him to Shame and Misery?

(3.) But that which added yet more to the height of the Provocation was, that he did not think of Returning home to his Father, upon the first apprehension of his own Folly; But he resolved to undergo any difficulty, and submit to any hardship, rather than doe what was necessary in order to Reconciliation with his Father.

How hard a Matter then is it to bring an habitual Sinner to Repentance! It is not Easie to bring him to any due and serious Conviction of the Evil of his doings; but it is far more difficult to change the inward Disposition of the Mind, and to alter all the great Designs and Pleasures of Life. It is but a mean Notion of Repentance which is apt to prevail in the World, as though it implied no more than some Acts of Contrition for greater Sins, when the Habit and Disposition remain the same. But true Repentance is the turn of the whole Soul from the Love, as well as the Practice of Sin; and this is not a thing to be done easily or suddenly; A Sinner will bear a great many Checks and Reproofs of Conscience before he will part with his beloved Sins; he will struggle a great while with himself; and endure many Conflicts between an awaken'd Conscience and rooted Inclinations before the Penitent Sinner can assure himself

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himself that his Repentance hath had its due and effectual operation upon him. For we see here nothing but extremity brought the Prodigal to himself, and made him at last to resolve *to arise and go to his Father*, &c. As *Themistocles* said of the People of *Athens*, they did by him, as Men commonly doe by a great Tree, they run to it for shelter in a Storm, but care not how they use it another Time; that is too true of Sinners with Respect to God; when they can make a shift for themselves any other Way, they despise Religion; and make God their Refuge onely at a day of Extremity, but not their Choice, when their Conditions please them.

*Ælian. var.
hist. l. 9.
c. 18.*

But when the Prodigal Son had so slighted his Father, broken his Commands, despised the advantages he had at home, and was so hardly brought to think of returning thither, how came he now to be so encouraged in his Mind *to arise and go to his Father*, and confess his fault with hopes of being forgiven after all this?

We find no other Account here given, but that he was *his Father*, however he had offended him; and therefore he was resolved he would *arise and go to his Father*; as though there were charms and force enough in that word to answer all Discouragements. Which being an Argument taken from the Bowels of Pity and Compassion which a Father hath towards a re-
lentling

lenting Child, we must enquire, how far this will hold with Respect to God, who is so infinitely above all the fond Passions of Humane Nature, that it is a diminution to his Glory and Majesty to be thought like to Mankind;

1C. 55. 8, 9. And therefore *his thoughts and ways are said to be as far above ours as the Heavens are above the Earth?*

To clear this, we are to consider, not onely that our Blessed Saviour doth here lay the force and weight of the Parable upon the tenderness of a Father to his Son; but that he elsewhere argues from it in such a manner as to convince us that God hath far greater Pity and Compassion towards Mankind when they make due Applications to him, than Fathers can have towards their Children even when they ask for necessary

Matt. 7. 9,
10, 11.

sustenance. *What Man is there of you, whom if his Son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or, if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then being evil know how to give good gifts unto your Children, How much more shall your Father which is in Heaven give good things to them that ask him?* There have been Philosophers so severe against the Passions of humane Nature, that they would not allow any Pity or Commiseration towards others, whatever their Condition or Relation were, but onely acting according to Reason in supplying their Wants. But the Christian Religion doth far more reasonably al-

low such Passions in Mankind as dispose them to doe good to others, by fixing such an impression on their minds of others Misery as doth excite them to doe what is fitting for their Ease and Support. And Compassion is not, as some imagine, such a mean and selfish Passion, as doth arise onely from the apprehension that we may suffer the same things our selves, which we pity others for; but it is a generous Sense of what others feel joined with a Readiness to help them according to our Power. And in this Sense, our Saviour not onely allows it in Fathers towards Children, but looks on it as necessary in humane Nature in order to the good and advantage of Mankind; and therefore himself taking our Nature upon him is said to be *touched with the feeling of our Infirmities; and to have compassion on the Ignorant, and on them that are out of the Way.* Heb. 4. 15. 5. 2.

But although this be allowable in humane Nature, how can such a thing as Compassion be attributed to the Divine Nature which is incapable of such impressions and motions, which we are subject to?

And yet the Scripture is very full and clear in attributing Pity and Compassion to Almighty God with Respect to his Creatures. The Psalmist saith, *The Lord is full of Compassion and Mercy; long-suffering, and of great Goodness.* St. James saith,

Ps. 103. 8.

Jam. 5. 11. *saith, He is very Pitifull, and of tender Mercy.*
 And in that wonderfull Appearance to Moses,
 when God himself declared his own Attributes,
 the greatest part consists of his Kindness and
 Mercy towards Mankind; *The Lord God, merci-*
 Exod. 34. *full and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in*
 6. 7. *goodness and Truth, keeping mercy for thousands,*
forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. And the
 Psalmist useth the very same similitude of a Fa-
 ther's Pity to his Children, *Like as a Father pi-*
 Ps. 103. 13. *tieth his Children, so the Lord pitieth them that*
fear him. And when the Prophet speaks of
 God's thoughts and ways being so much above
 Man's, it is for this end to prove thereby that
 God may shew more pity to Mankind, than
 they find in their hearts to shew to one another.
 Il. 55. 7. *Let him return unto the Lord, and he will have*
mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abun-
dantly pardon; For my thoughts are not your
thoughts, &c. But setting aside all this, the
 whole Scheme of the Gospel is drawn upon the
 Supposition of God's Pity and Compassion to-
 wards Penitent Sinners; which is the Reason
 our Saviour insists so much on the Proof of it in
 this whole Chapter. Wherein we not onely
 v. 7. 10. *reade of Joy in Heaven at the Repentance of a*
Sinner; but the Compassion of God Almighty
towards a Penitent Sinner is set forth with all
the tenderness of an Indulgent Father running
 into

into the embraces of his Son, when he saw him at a distance coming towards him.

What now is the meaning of all this? Are we to conceive of God as one like to our selves, who either do not see faults in those we love; or do not hate them, as we should do; or are too apt to pass them over; or are at first, it may be, apt to be angry upon a slight provocation, and then as easily made Friends upon as little Reason as we were made Angry? But none of these things ought to enter into our Minds concerning God with respect to the Follies of Mankind.

And in this Case, if we will form in our Minds right and true Conceptions of the Divine Nature (as we ought to doe) we must have a great Care lest we attribute any thing to God, which looks like Weakness and Imperfection, as the Motions and Changes of Passions do; therefore to understand his Pity and Compassion, and Reconciliation to Penitent Sinners, we must first know what his Anger and Displeasure against Sinners mean.

Some think that Epicurus did in earnest believe a God; but he was therefore forced to deny Providence, because he could not conceive that the Government of the World could be managed without such defects as were inconsistent with the complete happiness of the Divine Being; and therefore he rather chose to make him Care-

Laſt. de
Ira Dei,
c. 4.

less and Easie, than Active and liable to Passion. The *Stoicks* attributed to God all that was Good and Kind and Obliging; but would by no means endure that ever he should be said to be Angry or Displeased; which Doctrine did in effect overthrow Providence with Respect to Moral Actions, as much as the *Epicureans*. For if God did not regard the difference of Mens Actions, but was equally kind to them whether they did Good or Evil, such a Providence would have as little Influence on Mens Lives as if there were none at all. We must then suppose, if we would uphold Religion and Morality in the World, not onely that there is a Providence, but that God hath a different regard to Men according to the Good or Evil of their Actions. The Regard he hath to Men for being Good and doing Good is called his *Love*, his *Kindness*, his *Good-will*, his *Grace* and *Favour*; that which he hath to things that are Evil is called his *Hatred*; that which he hath to Persons for doing Evil is his *Anger*, *Wrath*, *Displeasure*, *Indignation*; according to the different Nature and Circumstances of their Evil Actions.

But in order to the preventing any false or mean Apprehensions of the Divine Nature, when the Passions of Mankind are attributed to it, we must consider these two things;

(1.) That

(1.) That we must by no means attribute to God any thing that is unreasonable in our Selves; such are all irregular Motions, which we call violent Passions, arising from Surprise, Mistake, Inadvertency, Weakness, or corrupt Inclination. But setting all these aside, the Original Passions of Mankind, which are agreeable to Reason, are no other than what arise from an Inclination to what we judge to be Good, and an Aversion from what we apprehend to be Evil; which holds as to the Divine Nature.

(2.) That there is an observable Difference in the very Nature of some Passions, which imply a Repugnancy in themselves to the Divine Perfections, which others do not. For Love and Kindness, and Joy, and Inward Satisfaction have nothing in them supposing their Object Good, but what agrees with the Divine Nature; but the Passions contrary to these, as Envy, Ill-will and Revenge are not onely Repugnant as Passions, but in their own Nature; for God cannot Envy the Good of his Creatures, nor bear Ill-will to them as such, nor take Pleasure in their Torments. And of this Nature *Anger* properly taken is, as it doth imply a present Disorder and Disturbance within, from the Apprehension of some Injury done or intended, with a Desire of Revenge on those who doe it; all which is inconsistent with

the necessary Perfections of God; for they argue Meanness, Imperfection and Mutability.

We must therefore fix on such a Notion of Anger as becomes the Almighty Wisdom and Goodness; and that lies in,

(1.) A Displeasure against the Sinner on the account of his Sins; For God cannot have any Complacency in those who displease him, as all Sinners do, whether they design it or not.

(2.) A Will to Punish Sinners according to their demerits; which being according to the Rules of Wisdom and Righteous Government, cannot be said to argue an indecent Passion.

(3.) The Actual Execution of his Justice upon great Provocations. And so God is said to be angry when he punishes; especially when he doeth it suddenly and severely; As Men in their Passion are wont to doe. But whatever God doeth in this kind, he doeth it with the Wisdom and Temper of a Judge, and not with the Fury or Passion of an Angry Being.

And there is nothing in all this unbecoming the Divine Nature, but very agreeable thereto. And this is all which in strictness of Reason is under-

understood by God's being *Angry* with Mankind. For we must never imagine that God acts according to sudden heats and Passions; but whatever he doth is according to the Counsels of Infinite Wisdom and Goodness.

I do not deny that the Scripture doth represent *Anger* in God as if it were a Passion raised upon great Provocation, and capable of being laid by Submission and true Repentance. Thence we read, of God's *Wrath waxing hot*, of his *Anger kindling against his People*, and his *turning away from his fierce Anger*, and many such Expressions; but so we read of the *Fire of his Indignation*, the *Sword of his Wrath*, the *Stretching forth of his Hand*; which all grant are not to be literally understood. If then in these Expressions, the Perfections of the Divine Nature are to be our Rule, according to which we must interpret them, because the literal sense implies an incongruity to the Divine Perfections which are all wholly Spiritual; then from the same Reason we must remove all Perturbations from it which are as inconsistent with the absolute Perfection of it, as *Eyes and Ears and Hands and Feet* are, although they are all mention'd in Scripture.

Exod. 32.
10.
If. 5. 26.
Jon. 3. 9.

From whence we justly infer, that there is a wonderfull Condescension to the ordinary Capacities and common Apprehensions of Mankind

kind in the Language of Scripture, concerning the Divine Nature, which makes deeper impressions on meaner understandings, and those who are of finer thoughts will see Cause to attribute onely such a Sense of things relating to God, as is consistent with his Infinite and Divine Perfections.

But what now shall we say to this Tenderness and Compassion of God towards Penitent Sinners? Can he be moved by our Trouble and Sorrow and Acts of Contrition for our Sins? If we be Righteous what doth it profit the Almighty? And if we be Evil, how can it hurt him? And if when we have Sinned, we Repent, we doe no more than is fitting for us; but why should we imagine the Great and Wise God should have Compassion upon us, when we become sensible of our own Folly? For when we sin against God, wilfully, deliberately, knowingly, habitually, we doe what lies in us to provoke him to Wrath and Indignation against us; we reject his Wise Government, we slight his righteous Laws, we prefer the pleasing our corrupt Inclinations and sensual Lusts before our Heavenly Father. And what can be more provoking to him than to be so despised by one who had his Being and all the Comforts of Life from him?

Suppose

Suppose now such a Disobedient, Rebellious Son, as here in the Parable, be made sensible of his folly, is his Father bound to receive him? Was it not his own choice to go from him? If he hath suffered by his Folly, he may thank himself for it; and if his Father lets him alone in it, he hath no Cause to Complain.

But such was the tenderness of the Father towards his Repenting Son, that he shew'd the greatest Compassion imaginable; for he did not stay at home expecting his Son's solemn submission before his Family, but *he ran towards him, and fell upon his Neck, and kissed him.*

What Conceptions now ought we to have of God's Compassion towards Penitent Sinners answerable to all this? This I shall endeavour to clear in these Particulars.

(1.) That God's hatred is not primarily against Persons who are his Creatures; but against that which is Evil, which is none of his making; and against Persons only so far as they are corrupted with Evil. *Thou lovest Righteousness, and hatest wickedness, saith the Psalmist. God hates nothing for its own sake, but Sin; and for the sake of that he hates all Workers of Iniquity.*

(2.) There

(2.) There may be Good-will towards the Person of a Sinner at the same time when God discovers the hatred of his Sins. I do not say, God takes any Pleasure in him while he goes on in Sin; for that is against the Eternal Rules of Righteousness in God; but that he may have so much Good-will towards him, as to design to reduce him from his Evil Ways. And this every Father finds in himself towards a disobedient Son; while he hates his evil Courses, yet he would make use of the best Methods to bring him to himself, and to his Duty. And upon this is grounded that *Love and Kindness of God towards Mankind*; in sending his Son to be our Saviour; and all the Promises and Invitations which are made to Sinners in the Doctrine of the Gospel.

(3.) It is very agreeable to Infinite Wisdom and Goodness for God to shew himself full of Pity and Compassion towards Penitent Sinners, so as to forgive them their former Sins, and to receive them into his Favour. For Pity and Compassion in God is to be judged, not according to the inward Motions we find in our selves, but according to these Two things

(1.) A readiness to doe Good to his Creatures according to their Necessities. Which being in general, is his *Bounty* and *Goodness*; but considered with Respect to the Persons of Sinners, it is his *Clemency*, or readiness to forgive; and with Respect to the *Punishment* they deserve by their Sins, it is his *Mercy* and *Pity*: Which in us is *Ægritudo ex Misericordia alterius*, and therefore called *Misericordia*, because the Heart is touched with the Sense of another's Misery; but we are not so to apprehend it in God; but that such is the Goodness of God towards Repenting Sinners, that he is as willing to shew Mercy as they are to Repent.

(2.) God's Pity and Compassion lies in the proper Effects of it; which here in the Case of the Prodigal were, passing by his former Extravagances, and receiving him into as much Favour as if he had not gone astray. *This my Son* v. 24-32. *was dead, and is alive again; was lost, and is found.* Those who think, they stand not in need of so much Pardoning Mercy as others do, are apt to repine at the Favour shew'd to great Sinners when they Repent; And therefore the Elder Brother could not bear the expressing so much kindness towards such a disobedient Son, though
D now

now a Penitent. But that there is nothing disagreeing to Infinite Wisdom and Goodness in such Compassion towards Penitent Sinners, will more fully appear, if we consider,

(1.) That God is not bound to deal with Sinners according to the utmost Rigour and Severity of his Justice. Because he is under no fatal Necessity; no Superiour Law; and therefore may act freely in the forgiving Offenders as seems best to his Infinite Wisdom. The whole Race of Mankind is a perpetual Evidence that God doth not Act according to the Strictness of his Justice, for *if he had dealt with them after their Sins, or rewarded them according to their Iniquities; their Spirits would have failed before him, and the Souls which he had made; they had been long since destroy'd from the face of the Earth, and not suffer'd to continue in their Provocations.* But God hath not onely forborn Sinners long when he might justly have punished them; but he gives them many real Blessings and Comforts of Life, freely and bountifully. Now if God deal so Mercifully with Sinners while they continue such, is there not greater Reason to suppose he will be far more so, when they cease to be such?

(2.) A Penitent Sinner doth what in him lies to vindicate God's Honour. I do not say, he can make satisfaction to Divine Justice ; for that is impossible for him to doe ; and God hath provided for that by his own Son, whom he hath made *a Propitiation for the Sins of the World.* But a true Penitent takes all the Shame and Dishonour to himself ; he clears the Justice of God's Government, and the Equity of his Laws, and owns himself guilty of unspeakable Folly in his Disobedience. " O how justly, " saith he, might God have taken me away in " the midst of my Sins, when my Conscience " checked me for my Sins, and yet I had no " heart to repent of them ! When I could not " but see my danger, and yet was unwilling " to come out of it. I can never be sufficiently " thankfull for so great a Mercy as his bringing " me to my Self hath been ; I had gon on in the " same secure, stupid, senseless condition, that " others lie in, if he had not thoroughly awa- " ken'd me, and roused me out of my Impeni- " tent State. How dreadfull had my Condition " for ever been, if my first awakening had been " in the Flames of Hell ? Nothing but Infinite " Goodness and Patience would have waited so " long for the Repentance of such an Offender

" as I have been. I have sinned so often, that
 " I am ashamed to think of the Number of my
 " Transgressions ; so deeply, that I am con-
 " founded at the thoughts of them ; so foolish-
 " ly, that I am unworthy to be called thy Son,
 " who have acted so unlike thy Children (so the
 " Prodigal Son here speaks to his Father) And
 " if thou wouldst admit me but to the meanest
 " Condition of thy Servants, I shall ever esteem
 " it as the greatest privilege of my Life, and en-
 " deavour to serve Thee for the future, though
 " in the lowest Capacity. Thus the Repenting
 Prodigal goes on, *v. 19.* And in a suitable man-
 ner every true Penitent behaves himself towards
 God with great Humility, and a deep Sense of
 his own unworthiness ; and is thereby rendred
 more capable of Divine favour. *For God resisteth*
the proud, but giveth grace to the humble. And
 therefore it is very agreeable to Infinite Wisdom
 and Goodness to shew pity towards a truly Hum-
 ble and Penitent Sinner ; *For a broken and contrite*
heart he will not despise.

Jam. 4. 6.

Ps. 51. 17.

(3.) If God were not so full of Compassion to
 Penitent Sinners, there would have been no In-
 couragement for Sinners to Repent ; but they
 must have sunk into everlasting Despair. For if
 God should forgive none that sin, then all Man-
 kind

kind must be condemned to Eternal Misery; for *all have sinned*; and *there is not a Just Man upon Earth who sinneth not*; and so the best and worst, and all sorts of Sinners must here suffer together; which would have taken away all the Notion of any such thing as Mercy and Clemency in God towards Mankind. But if we set bounds to it as to some particular kinds and degrees of sinning; we limit that which is Infinite; we determine what we know not, *viz.* how far God's Mercy doth extend; we destroy the Power of Divine Grace in Changing and Reforming the Worst of Men. But the Scripture hath recorded some remarkable Instances of great Sinners, who have been great Penitents, and upon that have been pardon'd (such as *Manasses*, and some others) that no Penitent Sinner might be discouraged in the Work of Repentance. For a True Penitent searching to the bottom, and setting all his Sins before him, with their several Aggravations, can be kept from Despair by nothing less than the Infinite Mercy of God to those who truly Repent.

(4.) Because there is nothing so provoking in Sin, as obstinate Impenitency, and Continuance in it.

It is

It is true, God hates all Sin for its own Sake; but not all equally; some Sins being of a higher Nature than others are; being against plainer Light, stronger Convictions, more easie Commands, stricter Obligations than others are; but yet it is the Temper of a Sinner's Mind, which is most provoking, when Sins are committed not through Infirmary, or sudden surprise, or a violent Temptation; but habitually, knowingly, wilfully; especially when they are done in Contempt of God and his Laws, and with an obstinate Resolution to continue in the Practice of them. This is so provoking to God, that the chief Reason of the severe Punishments of Sinners in another World is taken from thence; because God hates obstinate and impenitent Sin-

Exod. 34.

7.
1 John 5.
16, 17.

Matt. 22.

32.

ners. *And thus he will by no means acquit the Guilty. There is a Sin unto death, saith St. John, and there is a Sin not unto death.* There is a Sin unto death, which *Christ* hath said he will never pardon; and that is *blasphemy against the Holy Ghost*; a Sin which none who do truly own Christianity, are capable of committing.

But is there then no *Sin unto death* to them? Yes, it is possible for Men who have clear Convictions in their minds of the Truth of the Gospel, to act so plainly, and wilfully, and directly against it, as either to provoke God to take them away

away by an extraordinary Judgment, and so it is properly *a Sin unto death*; or to withdraw his Grace from them, and leave them to the hardness of their own Hearts, and so it becomes a Sin unto a Spiritual death. But besides these Cases; Every Wilfull Sinner who adds Impenitency to his Sin, commits *the Sin unto death*; because there is no other Condition of Pardon allow'd by the Gospel without True Repentance.

How infinite is the Goodness of God that excludes no Sinners from the Hopes of Pardon who have a heart to repent sincerely of their Sins! And how just is God in the final Punishment of those Sinners, who still go on in their Sins, and refuse to Repent; after all the Invitations and Encouragements which are given them to that End! Can we in Reason suppose that God should stoop lower towards Sinners, than to offer them pardon of former Sins, if they do Repent; and to tell them they must Expect no Mercy in another World if they do not Repent?

But suppose we are come thus far, that we are convinced we must Repent; what course and method must we take in order to it? Of this briefly, and so to conclude.

Secondly, I know no better than to follow the Example of the Prodigal Son here: and in the first

first place to form a present, sincere, fixed and peremptory Resolution of doing it; *I will arise and go to my Father, &c.* If we suffer Convictions to cool upon our Minds, the force and spirit of them will soon be gone. It hath been of late observed by the strictest Enquirers into Nature, that the beginnings of Life are very small, and hardly discernible. It is but as a spark that appears, and may easily be extinguished; but if it be encouraged by a continual heat, a wonderfull Alteration soon follows; and the distinct parts begin to be formed; the first which is discerned is the Eye, but the Fountain of Life is in the Heart; and when the course of the Bloud is there settled, the other Parts come to their due formation with greater quickness. This may be a Representation of the first Beginnings of Spiritual Life, that which answers to the Eye is the Conviction of the Mind, where the inward Change first appears; that which answers to the Heart is *Resolution*, and when that is fixed, a mighty Reformation will soon follow. But Spiritual Life as well as Natural is in its first beginnings a very nice and tender thing, it may be easily stopt, and very hardly recovered: It is therefore of very great concernment to keep up the Warmth of our first Resolutions, and to improve them into a present

present Practice agreeable thereto ; as the Prodigal Son here did, who when he had Resolved upon it, *did accordingly arise and go to his Father,* v. 20.

I do not think there are many Persons in the World who have Convictions upon their Minds of the Evil of their Ways ; but do Resolve at one time or other before they die to Repent of their Sins, and to make their Peace with God. But alas ! these are *Ova subventanea*, they make a fair appearance, but there is no principle of Life in them ; or as St. Jude expresses it, *they are Clouds* Jud. v. 12. *without Water ; of no Consistency, but carried about with winds ; hurried to and fro with the force and power of Temptations ; and then their Resolutions are like the Vapours* St. James speaks of, Jam. 4. 14 *which appear for a little Time, and then vanish away. Trees they are without fruit, as St. Jude goes on, ~~Abidez et dormez~~ ; not that make no shew or appearance of Fruit ; but it hath no such firmness and substance in it as to endure the nipping Frosts, and so it drops off, and withers away. Just such are the effects of faint and imperfect Resolutions, they never hold out long, and onely aggravate the Sins committed after them. For every such Sin is a plain sin against Conscience ; or else they would never have made any Resolution against it. And those who continue to sin*

E

after

after Resolutions against their Sins, not onely lose all the Peace and Comfort of their Minds, but make it much harder for them, either to make or trust their Resolutions again, and consequently to be satisfied of the Sincerity of their Repentance.

If we would then lay a sure Foundation for the Satisfaction of our Minds in a matter of such unconceivable Moment as the Truth of our Repentance is, let us call our Selves to an Account as to this matter of the firm Purpose and Resolution of our Minds. Have we strictly examin'd our Selves as to our particular Sins? For there is no Age, no Employment, no Condition of Life but hath its Temptations belonging to it; which require not onely our Care and Consideration, but Resolution to keep us from them. But suppose we have been overcome by *the Sin which doth so easily beset us*; the Work is harder to recover the Ground we have lost, than at first to maintain it; but if we have sinned, we must Repent; and the sooner the better; but it is not to be done without awakening the drouisie and benumbed Faculties of our Minds, and exercising the secret and hidden Powers therein. Not as though this were to be done without the Grace of God preventing and assisting us; but because *God worketh in us to will and to doe of his good*

good Pleasure, we ought to Work out our own Salvation with Fear and Trembling.

Let us then trifle no longer in a Work we can never doe too well, nor too soon; nor go about it with too much Resolution. It is the want of this, which ruins such a Number of those who would fain go to Heaven, but have not Courage and Resolution enough, to own their Repentance, and to break off their former Sins: They are half Penitents; they are inwardly troubled for them, and wish themselves able to withstand the next Temptation; but when it comes, they yield and suffer themselves to be drawn away, *as* Prov. 7.23. *a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his Life.* Now in such Cases, Resolution is not onely a convenient and proper thing; but a very Wise thing. For, when once a Resolution is found to be serious, and in good earnest, the former Compahions in Wickedness will leave off to solicit; and if once a Penitent Sinner can endure to be despised, and exposed for a time by Evil Men for owning his Repentance, he will find the other parts of his Change grow more easie to him; and the Devil's Instruments in Tempting will be like himself; *i. e.* they will give over Tempting when they see no hopes to prevail. And let no Men ever complain that they want Power to break off their former Sins, till they

they have tried what the strength of a Vigorous Resolution will do. But because we have always Reason to suspect our selves, let us make our Devout Applications to Almighty God to give us the Assistance of his Grace through the only Mediation of his Son *Jesus Christ. To whom, &c.*

THE END.